A. J. Cropsey's Colorful Life after Fairbury

By: Dale C. Maley
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Most area people know that the village of Cropsey and Cropsey Township are named after A. J. Cropsey. What is not widely known is the colorful and sometimes turbulent life he lived after leaving the Fairbury area.

Cropsey played an important role in the early development of Fairbury. In the late 1850s he arrived as one of the early settlers when the town was just beginning to take shape on the prairie. At that time, the town site belonged largely to Caleb Patton, the man who had laid out the original plat of Fairbury.

Patton soon discovered that developing a town required a great deal of time and effort. Land had to be surveyed, lots advertised, and buyers located. Rather than deal with all of those details himself, Patton turned the job over to A. J. Cropsey.

Cropsey proved to be extremely good at the work. Acting as a real estate promoter and developer, he purchased city lots from Patton and then resold them to incoming settlers and business owners. In effect, Cropsey became the salesman who helped populate the young community.

Through his efforts many of the first homes and businesses in Fairbury found their owners. Cropsey's success in selling lots demonstrated an ability that would shape the rest of his life. Real estate development and promotion became his lifelong occupation.

Like many young men of his generation, Cropsey's career was interrupted by the Civil War. He served as an officer in Company E of the 129th Illinois Infantry. During the war he gained a reputation as a capable and respected leader.

When the war ended in 1865, thousands of veterans returned home looking for opportunity. Cropsey decided to head west, where new towns were springing up across the plains. One of the most promising places at the time was Lincoln, Nebraska.

Lincoln had just been selected as the new state capital of Nebraska in 1867. Like Fairbury a decade earlier, the city existed largely on paper. Streets were being surveyed, lots were being sold, and speculators believed the new capital would grow rapidly.

For an experienced real estate promoter like Cropsey, it must have looked like the perfect opportunity. Because of his Civil War service, he was often called "Colonel Cropsey" by acquaintances and the newspapers.

Cropsey soon became involved in land dealings and development around Lincoln. At one point he built an impressive home in the growing city. The house was considered one of

the fine residences in Lincoln at the time. Interestingly, the property where his home once stood later became the site of the present Nebraska Governor's Mansion.

However, Cropsey's years in Lincoln would place him in the middle of one of Nebraska's most dramatic political controversies. The controversy centered around Governor David Butler, Nebraska's first governor after the territory became a state in 1867. Butler was a strong personality and an aggressive promoter of development in the young state. He also made political enemies along the way.

By 1871 those enemies had gathered enough support in the Nebraska legislature to begin impeachment proceedings against him. The charges against Butler included eleven different accusations. One of the most important involved the sale of state school lands in Lincoln.

Some legislators claimed Butler had improperly arranged for certain school lands to be sold and that friends or associates benefited from the transactions. Among the names mentioned in the controversy was A. J. Cropsey. Because of his involvement in the real estate dealings, Cropsey was called to testify during the impeachment investigation and trial.

Newspapers across Nebraska followed the case closely. One article reported that Cropsey appeared before the Impeachment investigators and answered questions about the land transactions connected with the governor.

According to the reports, Cropsey explained the circumstances of the purchase and the dealings involved. His testimony helped lawmakers understand how the land sales had been arranged and what role various individuals had played. Mr. Cropsey was not charged with any criminal wrongdoings as a result of the impeachment investigation.

The impeachment trial itself became one of the biggest political events in Nebraska's early history. The proceedings were held in the state senate, which served as the court of impeachment. Crowds gathered daily to watch the testimony. Newspapers printed long columns describing the arguments of the attorneys and the statements of witnesses.

In the end, the Nebraska legislature voted to convict Governor Butler on one of the eleven charges. As a result, he was removed from office in 1871.

However, the story did not end there. Many people believed the impeachment had been driven more by politics than by clear evidence of wrongdoing. Over time, Butler's reputation gradually improved. Years later the Nebraska legislature formally removed the stigma of impeachment and restored his political rights.

The entire episode left a colorful mark on Nebraska history. In fact, the trial became so famous that a theatrical play was later written about the impeachment proceedings. The play even included a character portraying A. J. Cropsey.

While the political drama unfolded, Cropsey continued working in real estate. But as many developers eventually learn, the real estate business often follows boom-and-bust cycles. During periods of rapid growth, fortunes can be made quickly. But when economic conditions change, property values can fall just as fast.

At some point the Nebraska real estate market cooled, and Cropsey's financial situation appears to have suffered. Like many speculators of the era, he faced financial setbacks when the boom years ended. Eventually Cropsey left Lincoln and moved to Ogden, a smaller community where he spent the final years of his life.

There, far from the political excitement and real estate speculation of Lincoln, his life gradually quieted. When he died, he was buried in Ogden.

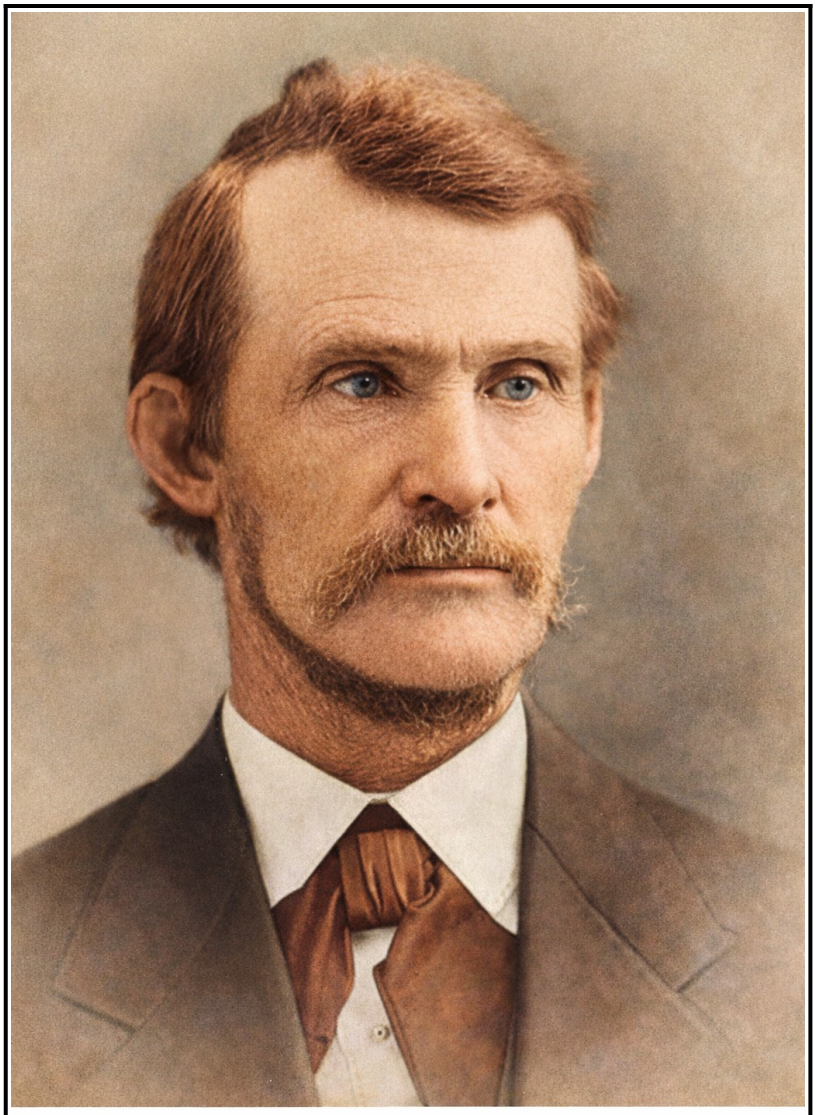
Today, very few physical reminders remain of Cropsey's remarkable career. Yet traces of his life still appear in surprising places. In Nebraska, the state's Governor's Mansion now stands on ground that once held the elegant home he built during his prosperous Lincoln years.

And back here in the Fairbury area, his name lives on in a different way. The village of Cropsey and Cropsey Township continue to carry the name of the energetic land promoter who helped sell many of the first lots in Fairbury.

When A. J. Cropsey first arrived on the Illinois prairie, he helped transform a small town site into a growing community. After the Civil War he carried that same spirit of promotion and development westward to Nebraska.

Along the way he built homes, promoted cities, testified in one of the state's most famous political trials, experienced financial ups and downs, and eventually ended his days in a quiet Midwestern town. Few early settlers led a life quite as colorful or eventful.

And while time has erased many of the details, the name Cropsey remains a lasting reminder of the energetic pioneer whose career stretched from the prairies of Illinois to the growing capital city of Nebraska.



A. J. Cropsey (1823-1896)